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“ UNDER WESTERN EYES ”*

BY JOSEPH CONRAD

CHAPTER IV

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.—*Razumov, a student of philosophy at the University of St. Petersburg, is supposed to be the son of humble parents, but is under the protection of a powerful nobleman. At the moment when he has decided to compete for a scholarship medal a despotic Minister of State is assassinated. Razumov returning to his rooms finds Haldin, a fellow student, awaiting him. Haldin reveals the fact that he threw the bomb which killed the minister. Believing Razumov sympathetic, he asks him to assist him in his escape. Razumov, inwardly protesting against being involved in the affair, starts out to do as Haldin wishes. The plan, however, miscarries, and Razumov in desperation decides to lay the whole matter before Prince K—, his mysterious protector. The Prince approves Razumov's conduct and takes him at once to the house of General T—, by whom he is closely questioned. The General learning the time and place at which Haldin expects to meet the man who is to convey him from the city, sends Razumov back to his rooms. He finds Haldin still there and tells him that all is arranged. In a thoughtless outburst he permits Haldin to discover that he is not in sympathy with his deed and Haldin departs, leaving Razumov uncertain whether the police are on hand to make the arrest. Exhausted by his emotion, he sets down briefly his own political creed, and, pinning the paper to the wall, falls into a troubled sleep. Still uncertain as to Haldin's fate, Razumov goes about his university work. He finds that his radical fellow students believe him sympathetic. He is told of Haldin's arrest and is offered assistance. His rooms are searched by the police and he is summoned before Councillor Mikulin, who has in his possession Razumov's political creed written on the night of Haldin's visit. He is told of Haldin's trial and execution and is closely questioned by the Councillor, to whom he resents bitterly the suspicion which has been attached to him. The narrative here leaves Razumov for the moment and the current instalment opens in Geneva, where Haldin's mother and sister are living.*

IN the conduct of an invented story there are, no doubt, certain proprieties to be observed for the sake of clearness and effect. A man of imagination, however inexperienced in the art of narrative, has his instinct to guide him in the choice of his words and in the development of the action. A grain of talent excuses many mistakes. But this is not a work of imagination; I have no talent; my excuse for this undertaking lies not in its art, but in its artlessness. Aware of my limitations and strong in the sincerity of my purpose, I would not try (were I able) to invent anything. I push my scruples so far that I would not even invent a transition.

Dropping then Mr. Razumov's record at the point where Councillor

Mikulin's question, "Where to?" comes, with its air of an insoluble problem, I shall simply say that I made the acquaintance of these ladies about six months before that time. By "these ladies," I mean, of course, the mother and the sister of the unfortunate Haldin.

By what arguments he had induced his mother to sell their little property and go abroad for an indefinite time, I cannot tell precisely. I have an idea that Mrs. Haldin, at her son's wish, would have set fire to her house and emigrated to the moon without any sign of surprise or apprehension; and that Miss Haldin—Natalia, caressingly Nataalka—would have given her assent to the scheme.

Their proud devotion to that young man became clear to me in a very short time. Following his directions, they went straight to Switzerland—to Zurich—where they remained the best part of a year. From Zurich, which they did not like, they came to Geneva. A friend of mine in Lausanne, a lecturer in history at the university (he had married a Russian lady, a distant connection of Mrs. Haldin's), wrote to me suggesting I should call on these ladies. It was a very kindly meant business suggestion. Miss Haldin wishes to go through a course of reading the best English authors with a competent teacher.

Mrs. Haldin received me very kindly. Her bad French, of which she was smilingly conscious, did away with the formality of the first interview. She was a tall woman in a black silk dress. A wide brow, regular features and delicately cut lips testified to her past beauty. She sat upright in an easy-chair and in a rather weak, gentle voice told me that her Nataalka simply thirsted after knowledge. Her thin hands were lying on her lap, her facial immobility had in it something monachal. "In Russia," she went on, "all knowledge was tainted with falsehood. Not chemistry and all that," she explained. The government corrupted the teaching of its own purposes. Both her children felt that. Her Nataalka had obtained a diploma of a Superior School for Women and her son was a student at the St. Petersburg University. He had a brilliant intellect, a most noble, unselfish nature, and he was the oracle of his comrades. Early next year, she hoped, he would join them and they would then go to Italy together. In any other country but their own she would have been certain of a great future for a man with the extraordinary abilities and the lofty character of her son—but in Russia. . . .

The young lady, sitting by the window, turned her head and said:

"Come, mother. Even with us things change with years."

Her voice was deep, almost harsh, and yet caressing in its harshness. She had a dark complexion, with red lips, and a full figure. She gave the impression of strong vitality. The old lady sighed.

"You are both young—you two. It is easy for you to hope. But I too am not hopeless. Indeed, how could I be with a son like this?"

I addressed Miss Haldin, asking her what authors she wished to read. She directed upon me her gray eyes shaded by black eyelashes, and I became aware, notwithstanding my years, how attractive physically her personality could be to a man capable of appreciating in a woman something else than the mere grace of femininity. Her glance was as direct and trustful as that of a young man yet unspoiled by the world's wise lessons. And it was intrepid, but in this intrepidity there was nothing aggressive. A naïve yet thoughtful assurance is a better definition. She had reflected already (in Russia the young begin to think early), but she

had never known deception as yet, because obviously she had never yet fallen under the sway of passion. She was—to look at her was enough—very capable of being roused by the idea or simply by a person. At least, so I judged, with I being an unbiassed mind; for clearly my person could not be the person—and as to my ideas! . . .

But we became excellent friends in the course of our reading. It was very pleasant. Without fear of provoking a smile, I shall confess that I became very much attached to that young girl. At the end of four months I told her that now she could very well go on reading English by herself. It was time for the teacher to depart. My pupil looked unpleasantly surprised.

Mrs. Haldin, with her immobility of feature and kindly expression of the eyes, uttered from her armchair in her uncertain French, "*Mais l'ami reviendra.*" And so it was settled. I returned—not four times a week as before, but pretty frequently. In the autumn we made some short excursions together in company with other Russians. My friendship with these ladies had given me a standing in the Russian colony which otherwise I could not have had.

The day I saw in the papers the news of Mr. de P——'s assassination—it was a Sunday—I met the ladies in the street and walked with them for some distance. Mrs. Haldin wore a heavy gray cloak, I remember, over her black silk dress, and her fine eyes met mine with a very quiet expression.

"We have been to the late service," she said. "Natalka came with me. Her girl friends, the students here, of course don't. . . . With us in Russia the Church is so identified with oppression that it seems almost necessary when one wishes to be free in this life to give up all hope of a future existence. But I cannot give up praying for my son."

She added, with a sort of stony grimness, coloring slightly, and in French, "*Ce n'est peut être qu'une habitude*" ("It may be only habit").

Miss Haldin was carrying the prayer-books. She did not glance at her mother.

"You and Victor are both profound believers," she said.

I communicated to them the news from their country which I had just read in a café. For a whole minute we walked together fairly briskly in silence. Then Mrs. Haldin murmured:

"There will be more trouble, more persecutions for this. They may be even closing the university. There is neither peace nor rest in Russia for one but in the grave."

"Yes. The way is hard," came from the daughter, looking straight before her at the Chain of Jura covered with snow, like a white wall closing the end of the street. "But concord is not so very far off."

"That is what my children think," observed Mrs. Haldin to me.

I did not conceal my feeling that these were strange times to talk of concord. Natalia Haldin surprised me by saying, as if she had thought very much on the subject, that the Occidentals did not understand the situation. She was very calm and youthfully superior.

"You think it is a class conflict, or a conflict of interests, as social contests are with you in Europe. But it is not that at all. It is something quite different."

"It is quite possible that I don't understand," I admitted.

That propensity of lifting every problem from the plane of the understandable by means of some sort of mystic expression is very Russian.

I knew her well enough to have discovered her scorn for all the practical forms of political liberty known to the Western world. I suppose one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity, a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naïve and hopeless cynicism. I think sometimes that the psychological secret of the profound difference is that that people detest life, the irremediable life of the earth as it is, whereas we Westerners cherish it with perhaps an equal exaggeration of its sentimental value. But this is a digression indeed. . . .

I helped these ladies into the tram-car and they asked me to call in the afternoon. At least, Mrs. Haldin asked me as she climbed up, and her Nataika smiled down at the dense Westerner indulgently from the rear platform of the moving car. The light of the clear wintry forenoon was softened in her gray eyes.

Mr. Razumov's record, like the open book of fate, revives for me the memory of that day as something startlingly pitiless in its freedom from all forebodings. Victor Haldin was still with the living, but with the living whose only contact with life is the expectation of death. He must have been already referring to the last of his earthly affections, the hours of that obstinate silence, which for him was to be prolonged into eternity. That afternoon the ladies entertained a good many of their compatriots—more than was usual for them to receive at one time; and the drawing-room on the ground floor of a large house on the Boulevard des Philosophes was very much crowded.

I outstayed everybody; and when I rose Miss Haldin stood up, too. I took her hand and was moved to revert to that morning's conversation in the street.

“ Admitting that we Occidentals do not understand the character of your people . . . ” I began.

It was as if she had been prepared for me by some mysterious foreknowledge. She checked me gently.

“ Their impulses—their . . . ” she sought the proper expression and found it, but in French . . . “ their *mouvements d'ame*. ”

Her voice was not much above a whisper.

“ Very well,” I said. “ But still we are looking at a conflict. You say it is not a conflict of classes and not a conflict of purposes. Suppose I admitted that. Are antagonistic ideas then to be reconciled more easily—can they be cemented with blood and violence into that concord which you proclaim to be so near? ”

She looked at me searchingly with her clear blue eyes without answering my reasonable question—my obvious, my unanswerable question.

“ It is inconceivable,” I added, with something like annoyance.

“ Everything is inconceivable,” she said. “ You and I—and mother, here, are inconceivable to each other's cold reason. There are too many contradictory irreconcilable ideas implied in our existence. The whole world is inconceivable to the strict logic of ideas. And yet the world exists to our senses and we exist in it. There must be a necessity superior to our conceptions. You are thinking of parliamentarism, no doubt—which is not concord at all. It is a very miserable and a very false thing to belong to the majority. We Russians shall find some better form of national freedom than an artificial conflict of parties—which is wrong because it is a conflict and contemptible because it is artificial. It is left for us Russians to discover a better way.”

Mrs. Haldin had been looking out of the window. She turned upon me the almost lifeless beauty of her face and the living benign glance of her big dark eyes.

"That's what my children think," she declared.

"I suppose," I addressed Miss Haldin, "that you will be shocked if I tell you that I haven't understood—I won't say a single word; I've understood all the words. . . . But what can be this era of disembodied concord you are looking forward to? Life is a thing of form. It has its plastic shape and a definite intellectual aspect. The most idealistic conceptions of love and forbearance must be clothed in flesh, as it were, before they can be made understandable."

I took my leave of Mrs. Haldin, whose beautiful lips never stirred. She smiled with her eyes only. Natalia Haldin went with me as far as the door very amiable.

"Mother imagines that I am the slavish echo of my brother Victor. It is not so. He understands me better than I can understand him. When he joins us and you come to know him you will see what an exceptional soul it is." She paused. "He is not a strong man in the conventional sense, you know," she added. "But his character is without a flaw."

"I believe that it will not be difficult for me to make friends with your brother Victor."

"Don't expect to understand him quite," she said, a little maliciously. "He is not at all—at all—Western at bottom."

And on this unnecessary warning I left the room with another bow in the doorway to Mrs. Haldin in her armchair by the window. The shadow of autocracy, all unperceived by me, had already fallen upon the Boulevard des Philosophes in the free, independent and democratic city of Geneva, where there is a quarter called "*La Petite Russie*." Whenever two Russians come together, the shadow of autocracy is with them, tinging their thoughts, their views, their most intimate feelings, their private life, the public utterances—haunting the secret of their silences.

What struck me next in the course of a week or so was the silence of these ladies. I used to meet them walking in the public garden near the university. They greeted me with their usual friendliness, but I could not help noticing their taciturnity. By that time it was generally known that the assassin of Mr. de P—— had been caught, judged and executed. So much had been declared officially to the news agencies. But for the world at large he remained anonymous. The official secrecy had withheld his name from the public. I really cannot explain from what cause.

One day I saw Miss Haldin walking alone in the main alley of the Bastions under the naked trees.

"Mother is not very well," she explained.

As Mrs. Haldin had, it seemed, never had a day's illness in her life this indisposition was disquieting. It was nothing definite, too.

"I think she is fretting because we have not heard from my brother for rather a long time."

"No news—good news," I said, cheerfully, and we began to walk slowly side by side.

"Not in Russia," she breathed out, so low that I only just caught the words. I looked at her with more attention.

"You too are anxious?"

She admitted, after a moment of hesitation, that she was.

“ It is really such a long time since we heard. . . . ”

And before I could offer the usual banal suggestions she confided in me.

“ Oh, but it is much worse than that. I wrote to a family we know in Petersburg. They had not seen him for more than a month. They thought he was already with us. They were even offended a little that he should have left Petersburg without calling on them. The husband of the lady went at once to his lodgings. Victor had left there and they did not know his address.”

I remember her catching her breath rather pitifully. Her brother had not been seen at lectures for a very long time, either. He only turned up now and then at the university gate to ask the porter for his letters. And the gentleman friend was told that the student Haldin did not come to claim the last two letters for him. But the police came to inquire if the student Haldin ever received any correspondence at the university and took them away.

“ My two last letters,” she said.

We faced each other. A few snowflakes fluttered under the naked boughs. The sky was dark.

“ What do you think could have happened?” I asked.

Her shoulders moved slightly.

“ One can never tell—in Russia.”

I saw then the shadow of autoeracy lying upon Russian lives in their submission or their revolt. I saw it touch her handsome open face nestled in a fur collar and darken her clear eyes that shone upon me brilliantly gray in the murky light of a beclouded inclement afternoon.

“ Let us move on,” she said. “ It is cold standing—to-day.”

She shuddered a little and stamped her little feet. We moved briskly to the end of the alley and back to the great gates of the garden.

“ Have you told your mother?” I ventured to ask.

“ No. Not yet. I came out to walk off the impression of this letter.”

I heard a rustle of paper somewhere. It came from her muff. She had the letter with her in there.

“ What is it that you are afraid of?” I asked.

To us Europeans of the West all ideas of political plots and conspiracies seem childish, crude inventions for the theatre or a novel. I did not like to be more definite in my inquiry.

“ For us—for my mother specially, what I am afraid of is incertitude. People do disappear. Yes, they do disappear. I leave you to imagine what it is—the cruelty of the dumb weeks—months—years! This friend of ours abandoned his inquiries when he heard of the police getting hold of the letters. I suppose he was afraid of compromising himself. He has a wife and children—and why should he, after all. . . . Moreover, he is without influential connections and not rich. What could he do? . . . Yes, I am afraid of silence—for my poor mother. She won’t be able to bear it. For my brother, I am afraid of”—she became almost indistinct—“ of anything.”

We were now near the gate opposite the theatre. She raised her voice.

“ But lost people do turn up even in Russia. Do you know what my last hope is? Perhaps the next thing we know we shall see him walking into our rooms.”

I raised my hat and she passed out of the gardens, graceful and strong, after a slight movement of the head to me, her hands in the muff crumpling the cruel Petersburg letter.

On returning home, I opened the newspaper I received from London, and, glancing down the correspondence from Russia—not the telegrams, but the correspondence—the first thing that caught my eye was the name of Haldin. Mr. de P——’s death was no longer an actuality, but the enterprising correspondent was proud of having ferreted out some unofficial information about that fact of modern history. He had got hold of Haldin’s name and had picked up the story of the midnight arrest in the street. But the sensation from a journalistic point of view was already well in the past. He did not allot to it more than half a dozen lines out of a full column. It was quite enough to give me a sleepless night. I perceived that it would have been a sort of treason to let Miss Haldin come without preparation upon that journalistic discovery which would infallibly be reproduced on the morrow by French and Swiss newspapers. I had a very bad time of it till the morning, wakeful with nervous worry and nightmarish with the feeling of being mixed up with something theatrical and morbidly affected. The incongruity of such a complication in those two women’s lives was sensible to me all night in the form of absolute anguish. It seemed due to their refined simplicity that it should remain concealed from them forever. At an unconsciously early hour, at the door of their apartment, I felt as if I were about to commit an act of vandalism. . . .

The middle-aged servant-woman led me into the drawing-room, where there was a duster on a chair and a broom leaning against the centre-table. The motes danced in the sunshine; I regretted I had not written a letter instead of coming myself, and was thankful for the brightness of the day. Miss Haldin, in a plain black dress, came lightly out of her mother’s room with a fixed uncertain smile on her lips.

I pulled the paper out of my pocket. I did not imagine that a number of the “Standard” could have the effect of Medusa’s head. Her face went stony in a moment—her eyes—her limbs. The most terrible thing was that, being stony, she remained alive. One was conscious of her palpitating heart. I hope she forgave me the delay of my clumsy circumlocution. It was not very prolonged; she could not have kept so still from head to foot for more than a second or two; and then I heard her draw a breath. As if the shock had paralyzed her moral resistance and affected the firmness of her muscles, the contours of her face seemed to have given way. She was frightfully altered. She looked old—ruined. But only for a moment. She said, with decision:

“I am going to tell my mother at once.”

“Would that be safe in her state?” I objected.

“What can be worse than the state she has been in for the last month? We understand this in another way. The crime is not at his door. Don’t imagine I am defending him before you.”

She went to the bedroom door, then came back where I sat to ask me in a low murmur not to go yet. For twenty interminable minutes not a sound reached me. At last Miss Haldin came out and walked across the room with her quick, light step. When she reached the armchair she dropped into it heavily as if completely exhausted.

Mrs. Haldin, she told me, had not shed a tear. She was sitting up in bed, and her immobility, her silence, were very alarming. At last she lay down gently and had motioned her daughter away.

“She will call me in presently,” added Miss Haldin. “I left a bell near the bed.”

I confess that my very real sympathy had no standpoint. The Western readers for whom this story is written will understand what I mean. It was, if I may say so, the want of experience. Death is a remorseless spoliator. The anguish of irreparable loss is familiar to us all. There is no life so lonely as to be safe against that experience. But the grief I had brought to these two ladies had grewsome associations. It had the associations of bombs and gallows—a lurid, Russian coloring which made the complexion of my sympathy uncertain.

I was grateful to Miss Haldin for not embarrassing me by an outward display of deep feeling. I admired her for that wonderful command over herself even while I was a little frightened at it. It was the stillness of a great tension. What if it should suddenly snap? Even the door of Mrs. Haldin's room, with the old mother alone in there, had a rather awful aspect.

Natalia Haldin murmured, sadly:

“ I suppose you are wondering what my feelings are? ”

Essentially that was true. It was that very wonder which unsettled my sympathy of a dense Occidental. I could get hold of nothing but of some commonplace phrases, those futile phrases that give the measure of our impotence before each other's trials. I mumbled something to the effect that for the young life held its hopes and compensations. It held duties, too; but of that, I was certain, it was not necessary to remind her.

She had a handkerchief in her hands and pulled at it nervously.

“ I am not likely to forget my mother, ” she said. “ We used to be three. Now we are two—two women. She's not so very old. She may live quite a long time yet. What have we to look for in the future? For what hope and what consolation? ”

“ You must take a wider view, ” I said, resolutely, thinking that with this exceptional creature this was the right note to strike. She looked at me steadily for a moment, and then the tears she had been keeping down flowed unrestrained. She jumped up and stood in the window with her back to me.

I slipped away without attempting even to approach her. Next day I was told at the door that Mrs. Haldin was better. The middle-aged servant remarked that a lot of people—Russians—had called that day, but Miss Haldin had not seen anybody. A fortnight later, when making my daily call, I was asked in and found Mrs. Haldin sitting in her usual place by the window.

At first one would have thought that nothing was changed. I saw across the room the familiar profile, a little sharper in outline and overspread by a uniform pallor, as might have been expected in an invalid. But no disease could have accounted for the change in her black eyes, smiling no longer with gentle irony. She raised them as she gave me her hand. I observed the three weeks' old number of the “ Standard ” folded, with the correspondence from Russia uppermost, lying on a little table by the side of the armchair. Mrs. Haldin's voice was startlingly weak and colorless. Her first words to me framed a question:

“ Has there been anything more in your newspapers? ”

I released her long emaciated hand, shook my head negatively, and sat down.

“ The English press is wonderful. Nothing can be kept secret from it and all the world must hear. Only our Russian news is not always easy

to understand. Not always easy. . . . But English mothers do not look for news like that. . . ."

She laid her hand on the newspaper and took it away again. I said:

"We too have had tragic times in our history."

"A long time ago. A very long time ago."

"Yes."

"There are nations that have made their bargain with fate," said Miss Haldin, who had approached us. "We need not envy them."

"Why this scorn?" I asked, gently. "It may be that our bargain was not a very lofty one. But the terms men and nations obtain from Fate are hallowed by the price."

Mrs. Haldin turned her head away and looked out of the window for a time with that new, sombre, extinct gaze of her sunken eyes which so completely made another woman of her.

"That Englishman, this correspondent," she addressed me, suddenly, "do you think it is possible that he knew my son?"

To this strange question I could only say that it was possible, of course. She saw my surprise.

"If one knew what sort of man he was one could perhaps write to him," she murmured.

"Mother thinks," explained Miss Haldin, standing between us, with one hand resting on the back of my chair, "that my poor brother perhaps did not try to save himself."

I looked up at Miss Haldin in sympathetic consternation, but Miss Haldin was looking down calmly at her mother. That last said:

"We do not know the address of any of his friends. Indeed, we know nothing of his Petersburg comrades. He had a multitude of young friends, only he never spoke much of them. One could guess that they were his disciples and that they idolized him. But he was so modest. One would think that with so many devoted. . . ."

She averted her head again and looked down the Boulevard des Philosophes, a singularly arid and dusty thoroughfare, where nothing could be seen at the moment but two dogs, a little girl in a pinafore hopping on one leg, and in the distance a workman wheeling a bicycle.

"Even amongst the Apostles of Christ there was found a Judas," she whispered as if to herself, but with the evident intention to be heard by me.

The Russian visitors, assembled in little knots, conversed amongst themselves meantime in low murmurs and with brief glances in our direction. It was a great contrast to the usual loud volubility of these gatherings. Miss Haldin followed me into the anteroom.

"People will come," she said. "We cannot shut the door in their faces."

While I was putting on my overcoat she began to talk to me of her mother. Poor Mrs. Haldin was fretting after more news. She wanted to go on hearing about her unfortunate son. She could not make up her mind to abandon him quietly to the dumb unknown. She would persist in pursuing him in there through the long days of motionless silence face to face with the empty Boulevard des Philosophes. She could not understand why he had not escaped—as so many other revolutionists and conspirators had managed to escape in other instances of that kind. It was really inconceivable that the means of secret revolutionary organizations should have failed so inexcusably to preserve her son. But in reality the

inconceivable that staggered her mind was nothing but the cruel audacity of Death passing over her head to strike at that young and precious heart.

Miss Haldin mechanically, with an absorbed look, handed me my hat. I understood from her that the poor woman was possessed by the sombre and simple idea that her son must have perished because he did not want to be saved. It could not have been that he despaired of his country's future. That was impossible. Was it possible that his mother and sister had not known how to merit his confidence; and that, after having done what he was compelled to do, his spirit became crushed by an intolerable doubt, his mind distracted by a sudden mistrust?

I was very much shocked by this piece of ingenuity.

“ Our three lives were like that!” Miss Haldin twined the fingers of both her hands together in demonstration, then separated them slowly, looking straight into my face. “ That's what poor mother found to torment herself and me with for all the years to come,” added this strange girl. At that moment her indefinable charm was revealed to me in the conjunction of passion and stoicism. I imagined what her life was likely to be by the side of Mrs. Haldin's terrible immobility inhabited by that fixed idea. But my concern was reduced to silence by my ignorance of her modes of feeling. Difference of nationality is a terrible obstacle for our complex Western natures. But Miss Haldin probably was too simple to suspect embarrassment. She did not wait for me to say anything, but as if reading my thoughts on my face, she went on, courageously:

“ At first poor mother went numb, as our peasants say; then she began to think, and she will go on now thinking and thinking in that unfortunate strain. You see yourself how cruel that is. . . .”

I never spoke with greater sincerity than when I agreed with her that it would be deplorable in the highest degree. She took an anxious breath.

“ But all these strange details in the English paper,” she exclaimed, suddenly. “ What is the meaning of them? I suppose they are true? But is it not terrible that he should be caught wandering alone, as if in despair, about the streets at night? . . .”

We stood so close to each other in the dark anteroom that I could see her biting her lower lip to suppress a dry sob. After a short pause she said:

“ I suggested to mother that he may have been betrayed by some false friend or simply by some cowardly creature. It may be easier for her to believe that.”

I understood now the poor woman's whispered allusion to Judas.

“ It may be easier,” I admitted, admiring inwardly the directness and the subtlety of the girl's outlook. She was dealing with life as it was made for her by the political conditions of her country. She faced cruel realities, not morbid imaginings of her own making. I could not defend myself from a certain feeling of respect when she added, simply:

“ Time, they say, can soften every sort of bitterness. But I cannot believe that it has any power over remorse. It is better that mother should think some person guilty of Victor's death than that she should connect it with a weakness of her son or a shortcoming of her own.”

“ But you yourself don't suppose that . . .” I began.

She compressed her lips and shook her head. She harbored no evil thoughts against any one, she declared—and perhaps nothing that happened

was unnecessary. On these words, pronounced low and sounding mysterious in the half obscurity of the anteroom, we parted with an expressive and warm handshake. The grip of her strong, shapely hand had a seductive frankness, a sort of exquisite virility. I do not know why she should have felt so friendly to me. It may be that she thought I understood her much better than I was able to do. The most precise of her sayings seemed always to me to have enigmatical prolongations, vanishing somewhere beyond my reach. I am reduced to suppose that she appreciated my attention and my silence. The attention she could see was quite sincere, so that the silence could not be suspected of coldness. It seemed to satisfy her. And it is to be noted that if she confided in me, it was clearly not with the expectation of receiving advice for which indeed she never asked.

CHAPTER V

OUR daily relations were interrupted at this period for something like a fortnight. I had to absent myself unexpectedly from Geneva. On my return, I lost no time in directing my steps up the Boulevard des Philosophes.

Through the open door of the drawing-room I was annoyed to hear a visitor holding forth steadily in an unctuous deep voice.

Mrs. Haldin's armchair by the window stood empty. On the sofa Natalia Haldin raised her charming gray eyes in a glance of greeting accompanied by the merest hint of a welcoming smile. But she made no movement. With her strong white hands lying inverted in the lap of her mourning dress she faced a man who presented to me a robust back covered with black broadcloth and well in keeping with the deep voice. He turned his head sharply over his shoulder, but only for a moment.

"Ah, your English friend. I know. I know. That's nothing."

He wore spectacles with smoked glasses, a tall silk hat stood on the floor by the side of his chair. Flourishing slightly a big soft hand, he went on with his discourse, precipitating his delivery a little more.

"I have never changed the faith I held while wandering in the forests and bogs of Siberia. It sustained me then—it sustains me now. All the great Powers of Europe are bound to disappear—and the cause of their collapse will be very simple. They will exhaust themselves struggling against their proletariat. In Russia it is different. In Russia we have no classes to combat each other, one holding the power of wealth and the other mighty with the strength of numbers. We have only an unclean bureaucracy in the face of a people as great and as incorruptible as the ocean. No, we have no classes. But we have the Russian woman. The admirable Russian woman! I receive most remarkable letters signed by women. So elevated in tone, so courageous, breathing such a noble ardor of service! The greatest part of our hope rests on women. I behold their thirst for knowledge. It is admirable. Look how they absorb, how they are making it their own. It is miraculous. But what is knowledge? . . . I understand that you have not been studying anything especially—medicine, for instance. No? That's right. Had I been honored by being asked to advise you on the use of your time when you arrived here, I would have been strongly opposed to such a course. Knowledge in itself is mere dross."

He had one of those vast bearded Russian faces without shape, a mere appearance of flesh and hair with not a single feature having any sort

of character. His eyes being hidden by the dark glasses, there was an utter absence of all expression. I knew him by sight. He was a Russian refugee of mark. All Geneva knew his burly black-coated figure. At one time all Europe was aware of the story of his life written by himself and translated into seven or more languages. He had led an idle, dissolute life. Then a society girl he was about to marry died suddenly, and thereupon he abandoned the world of fashion and began to conspire in a spirit of repentance; and after that his native autocracy took good care that the usual things should happen to him. He was imprisoned in fortresses, beaten within an inch of his life, and condemned to work in mines with common criminals. The great success of his book, however, was the chain.

I do not remember now the details of the weight and length of the fetters rivetted on his limbs by an “ administrative ” order, but it was in the number of pounds and the thickness of links an appalling assertion of the divine rights of autocracy. Appalling and futile, too, because this big man managed to carry off that simple engine of government with him into the woods. The sensational clink of irons is heard all through the chapters describing his escape—a subject of wonder to two continents. He had begun by concealing himself successfully from his guards in a hole on a river bank. It was the end of day. With infinite labor he managed to free one of his legs. Meantime night fell. He was going to begin on his other leg when he was overtaken by a terrible misfortune. He dropped his file.

All this is precise, yet symbolic; and the file had its pathetic history. It was given to him unexpectedly one evening by a quiet, pale-faced girl. The poor creature had come out to the mines to join one of his fellow convicts, a delicate young man, a mechanic and a social democrat with broad cheek-bones and large staring eyes. She had worked her way across half Russia and nearly the whole of Siberia to be near him and, as it seems, with the hope of helping him to escape. But she arrived too late. Her lover had died only a week before.

Through that obscure episode, as he says in the history of “ Ideas in Russia,” the file came into his hands, and its possession inspired him with an ardent resolution to regain his liberty. When it slipped through his fingers it was as if it had gone straight into the earth. He could by no manner of means put his hand on it again in the dark. He groped systematically in the loose earth, in the mud, in the water; the night was passing, meantime, the precious night on which he counted to get away into the forests, his only chance of success. For a moment he was tempted by despair to give up, but recalling the quiet, sad face of the heroic girl, he felt profoundly ashamed of his weakness. She had selected him for the gift of liberty, and he must show himself worthy of the favor conferred by her feminine indomitable soul. It appeared to be a sacred trust. To fail would have been a sort of treason against the sacredness of self-sacrifice and womanly love.

There are in his book whole pages of self-analysis whence emerges like a white figure from a dark confused sea the conviction of woman’s spiritual superiority—his new faith confessed since in several volumes. His first tribute to it, the great act of his conversion, was his extraordinary existence in the endless forests of the Okhotsk Province, with the loose end of the chain wound about his waist. A strip torn off his convict shirt secured the end firmly. Other strips fastened it at intervals up his left leg to

deaden the clanking and to prevent the slack links from getting hooked in the bushes. He became very fierce. He developed an unsuspected genius for the arts of a wild and haunted existence. He learned to creep into villages without betraying his presence by anything more than an occasional faint jingle. He broke into outhouses with an axe he managed to purloin in a wood-cutters' camp very early in the story. In the deserted tracts of country he lived on wild berries and hunted for honey. His clothing dropped off him gradually. His naked, tawny figure glimpsed vaguely through the bushes with a cloud of mosquitoes and flies hovering about the shaggy head spread tales of terror through whole districts. His temper grew savage as the days went by, and he was glad to discover that there was so much of a brute in him. He had nothing else to put his trust in. For it was as though there had been two human beings indissolubly joined in that enterprise. The civilized man, the enthusiast of advanced humanitarian ideals thirsting for the triumph of spiritual love and political liberty; and the stealthy primeval savage, pitilessly cunning in the preservation of his freedom from day to day like a tracked wild beast.

The wild beast was making its way instinctively eastward to the Pacific coast, and the civilized humanitarian followed in fearful anxious dependence, watching the proceedings with awe. Through all these weeks he could never make up his mind to appeal to human compassion. In the wary primeval savage this shyness might have been natural, but the other, too, the civilized creature, the thinker, the escaping "political," had developed an absurd form of morbid pessimism, a form of temporary insanity, originating perhaps in the physical worry and discomfort of the chain. These links, he fancied, made him odious to the rest of mankind. It was a repugnant and suggestive load. Nobody could feel any pity at the disgusting sight of a man escaping with a broken chain. His imagination became affected by his fetters in a precise, matter-of-fact manner. It seemed to him impossible that people could resist the temptation of fastening the loose end to a staple in the wall while they went for the nearest police official. Crouching in holes or hidden in thickets, he had tried to read the faces of unsuspecting peasants working in the clearings or passing along the paths within a foot or two of his eyes. His feeling was that no man on earth could be trusted with the temptation of the chain.

One day, however, he chanced to come upon a solitary woman. It was on an open slope of rough grass outside the forest. She sat on the bank of a narrow stream; she had a red handkerchief on her head and a small basket was lying on the ground near her hand. At a little distance could be seen a cluster of log cabins, with a water-mill over a dammed pool shaded by birch-trees and looking bright as glass in the twilight. He approached her silently, his hatchet sticking in his iron belt, a thick cudgel in his hand; there were leaves and bits of twig in his tangled hair, in his matted beard; bunches of rags he had wound round the links fluttered from his waist. A faint clink of his fetters made the woman turn her head. Too terrified by this savage apparition to jump up or even to scream, she was yet too stout-hearted to faint. . . . Expecting nothing less than to be murdered on the spot, she covered her eyes to avoid the sight of the descending axe. When at last she found courage to look again she saw him sitting on the bank six feet away from her. His thin sinewy arms hugged his naked legs; the long beard covered the knees on which

he rested his chin; all these clasped, folded limbs, the bare shoulders, the wild head with red staring eyes, shook and trembled violently while the bestial creature was making efforts to speak. It was six weeks since he had heard the sound of his own voice. It seemed as though he had lost the faculty of speech. He had become a dumb and despairing brute till the woman's sudden, unexpected cry of profound pity, the insight of her feminine compassion discovering the complex misery of the man under the terrifying aspect of the monster, restored him to the ranks of humanity. This point of view is presented in his book with a very effective eloquence. She ended, he says, by shedding tears over him, sacred, redeeming tears, while he also wept with joy in the manner of a converted sinner. Directing him to hide in the bushes and wait patiently (a police patrol was expected in the settlement), she went away toward the houses, promising to return at night.

As if providentially appointed to be the newly wedded wife of the village blacksmith, the woman persuaded her husband to come out with her, bringing some tools of his trade—a hammer, a chisel, a small anvil. . . . “My fetters,” the book says, “were struck off on the banks of the stream in the starlight of a calm night by an athletic, taciturn young man of the people kneeling at my feet, while the woman, like a liberating genius, stood by with clasped hands.” Obviously a symbolic couple. At the same time they furnished his regained humanity with some decent clothing and put heart into the new man by the information that the seacoast of the Pacific was only a very few miles away. It could be seen, in fact, from the top of the next ridge. . . .

The rest of his escape does not lend itself to mystic treatment and symbolic interpretation. He ended by finding his way to the West by the Suez Canal route in the usual manner. Reaching the shores of south Europe, he sat down to write his autobiography—the great literary success of its year. This book was followed by other books written with the declared purpose of elevating humanity. In these works he preached generally the cult of the woman. For his own part, he practised it under the rites of special devotion to the transcendental merits of a certain Madame de S—, a lady of advanced views, no longer very young, once upon a time the intriguing wife of a now dead and forgotten diplomat. Her loud pretensions to be one of the leaders of modern thought and of modern sentiment she sheltered (like Voltaire and Madame de Staël) on the republican territory of Geneva. Driving through the streets in her big landau, she exhibited to the indifference of the natives and the stares of the tourists a long-waisted, youthful figure of hieratic stiffness, with a pair of big gleaming eyes rolling restlessly behind a short veil of black lace, which, coming down no farther than her vividly red lips, resembled a mask. Usually the “heroic fugitive” (this description is applied to him in a review of the English edition of his book) accompanied her, sitting, portentously bearded and darkly bespectacled, not by her side, but opposite her, with his back to the horses. Thus facing each other, with no one else in the roomy carriage, their airings suggested a conscious public manifestation. Or it may have been unconscious. Russian simplicity often marches innocently on the edge of cynicism for some lofty purpose. But it is a vain enterprise for the sophisticated Europe to try to understand these doings. Considering the air of gravity extending even to the physiognomy of the coachman and the action of the showy

horses, this quaint display might have possessed a mystic significance, but to the corrupt frivolity of a Western mind like my own it seemed hardly decent.

However, it is not becoming for an obscure teacher of languages to criticise a "heroic fugitive" of world-wide celebrity. I was aware from hearsay that he was an industrious busybody, hunting up his compatriots in hotels, in private lodgings, and—I was told—conferring upon them the honor of his notice in public gardens when a suitable opening presented itself. I was under the impression that after a visit or two several months before he had given up the ladies Haldin—no doubt reluctantly, for there could be no question of his being a determined person. It was, perhaps, to be expected that he should reappear again on this terrible occasion as a Russian and a revolutionist to say the right thing, to strike the true, perhaps a comforting note. But I did not like to see him sitting there. I trust that an unbecoming jealousy of my privileged position had nothing to do with it. I made no claim to a special standing for my silent friendship. Removed by the difference of age and nationality, as if into the sphere of another existence, I produced even upon myself the effect of a dumb, helpless ghost, of an anxious immaterial thing that could only hover about without the power to protect or guide by as much as a whisper. Since Miss Haldin, with her sure instinct, had refrained from introducing me to the burly celebrity, I would have retired quietly and returned later on had I not met a peculiar expression in her eyes which I interpreted as a request to stay, with the view, perhaps, of shortening an unwelcome visit.

He picked up his hat, but only to deposit it on his knees.

"We shall meet again, Natalia Victorovna. To-day I have called only to make those feelings towards your honored mother and yourself, the nature of which you cannot doubt. I needed no urging, but Eleanor—Madame de S—— herself had in a way sent me. She extends to you the hand of feminine fellowship. There is positively in all the range of human sentiments no joy and no sorrow that woman cannot understand, elevate and spiritualize by her interpretation. That young man newly arrived from St. Petersburg I have mentioned to you is already under the charm."

At this point Miss Haldin got up abruptly. I was glad. He did not evidently expect anything so decisive, and at first, throwing his head back, he tilted up his dark glasses with an air of bland curiosity. At last, recollecting himself, he stood up hastily, seizing his hat as he did so off his knees with great adroitness.

"How is it, Natalia Victorovna, that you have kept aloof so long, from what, after all, is—let disparaging tongues say what they like—a unique centre of intellectual freedom and of effort toward giving body to a high conception of our future? In the case of your honored mother I understand in a measure. At her age new ideas—new faces are not, perhaps. . . . But you! Was it mistrust—or indifference? You must come out of your reserve. We Russians have no right to be reserved with each other. In our circumstances, it is almost a crime against humanity. The luxury of private grief is not for us. Nowadays the devil is not combated by prayers and fasting. And what is fasting, after all, but starvation? You must not starve yourself, Natalia Victorovna. Strength is what we want. Spiritual strength, I mean to say. As to the other kind, what could withstand us Russians if we only put it forth? Sin is different in our day,

and the way of salvation for pure souls is different, too. It is no longer to be found in monasteries, but in the world, in the. . . .”

The deep sound seemed to come from under the floor, and one felt steeped in it to the lips. Miss Haldin's interruption resembled the effort of a drowning person to keep above water. She struck in with an accent of impatience:

“But, Peter Ivanovitch, I don't mean to retire into a monastery. Who would look for salvation there?”

“I spoke figuratively,” he boomed.

“Well, then, I am speaking figuratively, too. But sorrow is sorrow and pain is pain in the old way. They make their demands upon people. One has got to face them the best way one can. I know that the blow which has fallen upon us so unexpectedly is only an episode in the fate of a people. You may rest assured that I don't forget that. But just now I have to think of my mother. How can you expect me to leave her to herself? . . .”

“That is putting it in a very crude way,” he protested in his great, effortless voice.

Miss Haldin did not wait for the vibration to die out.

“And run about visiting amongst a lot of strange people. The idea is distasteful for me; and I do not know what else you may mean?”

He towered before her, enormous, deferential, cropped as close as a convict; and this big pinkish poll evoked for me the vision of a wild head with matted locks peering through parted bushes, glimpses of tawny limbs slinking behind the masses of sodden foliage under a cloud of flies and mosquitoes. It was an involuntary tribute to the vigor of his writing. Nobody could doubt that he had wandered in Siberian forests naked and girt with a chain. The black broadcloth coat invested his person with a character of common and austere decency—something recalling a missionary.

“Do you know what I want, Natalia Victorovna?” he uttered, solemnly. “I want you to be a fanatic.”

“A fanatic!”

“Yes. Faith alone won't do.”

His voice dropped to a still lower tone. He raised for a moment one thick arm; the other remained hanging down against his thigh, with the fragile silk hat at the end.

“I shall tell you now something which I entreat you to ponder over carefully. Listen: we need a force that would move heaven and earth—nothing less.”

The profound, subterranean note of this “nothing less” made one shudder, almost, like the deep muttering of wind in the pipes of an organ.

“And are we to find that force in the salon of Madame de S——? Excuse me, Peter Ivanovitch, if I permit myself to doubt it. Is not that lady a woman of the great world, an aristocrat?”

“Prejudice!” he cried. “You astonish me. And suppose she was all that. She is also a woman of flesh and blood. There is always something to weigh down the spiritual side. In all of us. But to make of it a reproach is what I did not expect from you. No; I did not expect that. One would think you have listened to some malevolent scandal.”

“I have heard no gossip, I assure you. In our province how could we? But the world speaks of her. What can there be in common in a lady of that sort and an obscure country girl like me?”

"She is a perpetual manifestation of a noble and peerless spirit," he broke in. Her charm—no, I shall not speak of her charm. But, of course, everybody who approaches her falls under the spell. . . . Contradictions vanish, trouble falls away from one. . . . Unless I am mistaken—but I never make a mistake in spiritual matters—you are troubled in your soul, Natalia Victorovna."

Miss Haldin's clear eyes looked straight at his soft, enormous face. I received the impression that behind those dark spectacles of his he could be as impudent as he chose.

"Only the other evening, walking back to town from Château Borel with our latest interesting arrival from Petersburg, I could notice the powerful, soothing influence—I may say reconciling influence. . . . There he was all these kilometres along the shores of the lake, silent, like a man who has been shown the way of peace. I could feel the heaven working in his soul, you understand. For one thing he listened to me patiently. I myself was inspired that evening by the firm and exquisite genius of Eleanor—Madame de S—, you know. It was a full moon and I could observe his face. I cannot be deceived. . . ."

Miss Haldin, looking down, seemed to hesitate.

"Well, I will think of what you said, Peter Ivanovitch. I shall try to call as soon as I can leave mother for an hour or two safely."

Coldly as these words were said, I was amazed at such a concession. He snatched her right hand with such fervor that I thought he was going to press it to his lips or his breast. But he only held it by the finger tips in his great paw and shook it a little up and down while he delivered his last volley of words.

"That's right. That's right. I haven't obtained your full confidence as yet, Natalia Victorovna, but that will come. All in good time. The sister of Victor Haldin cannot be without importance. . . . It's simply impossible. And no woman can remain sitting on the steps. Flowers, tears, applause—that has had its time; it's a mediæval conception. The arena, the arena itself is the place for women!"

He relinquished her hand with a short flourish, as if giving it to her for a gift, and remained still, his head bowed in dignified submission before her femininity.

"The arena! . . . You must descend into the arena, Natalia."

He stepped back a pace, bowed his enormous body, and was gone swiftly. The door fell behind him. But immediately the powerful resonance of his voice was heard addressing in the anteroom the middle-aged servant-woman who was letting him out. Whether he exhorted her to descend into the arena I cannot tell. The thing sounded like a lecture, and the slight crash of the outer door cut it short suddenly.

(To be Continued)